



Queer Nationality

Author(s): Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *boundary 2*, Vol. 19, No. 1, New Americanists 2: National Identities and Postnational Narratives (Spring, 1992), pp. 149-180

Published by: [Duke University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/303454>

Accessed: 04/01/2012 04:38

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Duke University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *boundary 2*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Queer Nationality

Lauren Berlant
Elizabeth Freeman

Now the skins felt powerful and human.
They became lords of sounds and lesser things.
They passed nations through their mouths.
They sat in judgement.
—Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

We Are Everywhere. We Want Everything.
—Queer Nation, Gay Pride Parade, New York, 1991

I Pledge Allegiance to the F(l)ag

At the end of Sandra Bernhard's film *Without You I'm Nothing*, the diva wraps herself in an American flag. This act, which emblazons her in-

We thank our collaboratrixes: Claudia L. Johnson, Tricia Loughran, Deborah N. Schwartz, Tom Stillinger, AK Summers, Michael Warner, the Gay and Lesbian Studies Workshop at the University of Chicago, and the Cultural Forms/Public Spheres study group at the Center of Psychosocial Research.

boundary 2 19:1, 1992. Copyright © 1992 by Duke University Press. CCC 0190-3659/91/\$1.50.

terpretation of Prince's "Little Red Corvette," culminates her performance of feminine drag, feminist camp. Staging not a cross-dressing that binarizes sex but a masquerade that smudges the clarity of gender, Bernhard frames *woman* within a constellation of sexual practices whose forms of publicity change by the decade, by subcultural origin, by genres of pleasure (music, fashion, political theater), and by conventions of collective erotic fantasy. Having sexually overdressed for the bulk of the film, Bernhard strips down to a flag and a sequined red, white, and blue G-string and pasties, and thus exposes a national body—her body. This national body does not address a mass or abstract audience of generic Americans, nor does it campily evoke a "typical" American citizen's nostalgia for collective memory, ritual, and affect. Bernhard flags her body to mark a fantasy of erotic identification with someone present, in the intimate room: it is a national fantasy, displayed as a spectacle of desire, and a fantasy, apparently external to the official national frame, of communion with a black woman whose appearance personifies authenticity.

At the same time, also in 1990, Madonna responded to a civic crisis marked by voter apathy among youth by performing in a pro-voting commercial stripped down to a bikini and wrapped alluringly in an American flag. In this commercial, the blond bombshell is flanked by a black man and a white man, both of whom are dressed in the clone semiotic that flags a certain East Coast urban gay community style. These men sing "Get Out and Vote" in discordant comic harmony with Madonna, while they wave little flags and she flashes her body by undulating a big one.

On March 24, 1991, the *Chicago Tribune Magazine* featured the Gulf War as a fashion event. Adding to the already widely publicized rush by citizens to own their very own gas masks and military fatigues, supplementing the fad for patriotic tee shirts and sweatshirts bearing American flags and mottoes like "These Colors Won't Run," this style section, titled "Red, White, and You," featured the new rage in feminine fashion: red, white, and blue. Mobilized by the patriotic furor generated by the war, women en masse were signifying through the color combination and not the icon, capitalizing on the capacity of the flag's traces to communicate personal politics without explicit polemic. The dissolution of the flag into flagness also protected the consumer from being charged with desecrating the flag, should it become stained with food or sweat, or singed with the dropped ashes of a cigarette.

In 1991, *RFD*, a magazine for rural gays with connections to the Radical Faeries, featured the image of a naked young white man with an erection on a pedestal, set against the background of an American flag. Two

captions graced this portrait: "BRING OUR BOYS HOME AND WHOLE THIS SOLSTICE PEACE NOW!" and "What could be more American than young, hard man/boy flesh?"

A rhetorical question? Having witnessed this rush to consume the flag, to fuse it with the flesh, we conclude that at present the nation suffers from *Americana nervosa*, a compulsive self-gorging on ritual images. This grotesque fantasy structure was paraded in the 1988 presidential election by the Republican flap over whether citizens should be legally obliged to say the Pledge of Allegiance. It was further extended from mass public struggle into the Supreme Court by constitutional battles over whether the flag should be exposed to mortality's contagion in the form of its own ashes or dirt, and it has recast national patriotism as a question not of political identity but of proper public expression, loyal self-censorship, and personal discipline. No longer is the struggle to secure national discursive propriety located mainly on the general terrain of "freedom of speech," state policies against certain sexual practices, and the regulation of privately consumed sexual images within the U.S. mail: The struggle is now also over proper public submission to national iconicity and over the nation's relation to gender, to sexuality, and to death.

If, in the wake of the election and the remilitarization of America, official patriotic discourse casts the American flag in an epidemic crisis and struggles to manage its public meaning through a sublime collective manufactured consent, the consumption of nationality in the nineties appears motivated not by a satisfaction that already exists but by a collective desire to reclaim the nation for pleasure, and specifically the pleasure of spectacular public self-entitlement. Queer Nation has taken up the project of coordinating a new nationality. Its relation to nationhood is multiple and ambiguous, however, taking as much from the insurgent nationalisms of oppressed peoples as from the revolutionary idealism of the United States. Since its inception in 1990, it has invented collective local rituals of resistance, mass cultural spectacles, an organization, and even a lexicon to achieve these ends. It aims to capitalize on the difficulty of locating the national public, whose consent to self-expression founds modern national identity.¹

1. There is yet no anthology or full history documenting Queer Nation, and its redefinitions in the print media are ongoing. For some contemporary accounts of QN, see the following articles: Allan Bérubé and Jeffrey Escoffier, "Queer/Nation," *Outlook: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly* 11 (Winter 1991): 13–15; Alexander Chee, "A Queer Nation-

Queer Nation's outspoken promotion of a national sexuality not only discloses that mainstream national identity touts a subliminal sexuality more official than a state flower or a national bird but also makes explicit how thoroughly the local experience of the body is framed by laws, policies, and social customs regulating sexuality. Queer Nation's tactics of invention appropriate for gay politics both grass roots and mass-mediated forms of countercultural resistance from left, feminist, and civil rights movements of the sixties—the ones that insisted that the personal is political, engaging the complex relation between local and national practices. Also, in the retro-nostalgia impulse of postmodernism, QN redeploys these tactics in a kind of guerrilla warfare that names all concrete and abstract spaces of social communication as places where “the people” live and thus as national sites ripe both for transgression and legitimate visibility.² Its tactics are to cross borders, to occupy spaces, and to mime the privileges of normality—in short, to simulate “the national” with a camp inflection. This model of political identity imitates not so much the “one man one vote” caucus polemic mentality of mainstream politics but the individual and mass identities of consumers: Queer Nation, itself a collection of local affinity groups,³ has produced images, occupied public spaces of consumption, like bars and malls, and refunctioned the culture of the trademark. Exploiting the structures of identification and the embodied and disembodied scenes of erotic contact, substitution, publicity, and exchange so central to the

alism,” *Outlook: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly* 11 (Winter 1991): 15–19; Esther Kaplan, “A Queer Manifesto,” in Guy Trebay’s article “In Your Face,” *Village Voice* 14 (August 1990): 36; Kay Longcope, “Boston Gay Groups Vow New Militancy against Hate Crimes,” *Boston Globe*, Wednesday, 21 Aug. 1990: 25, 31; Maria Maggenti, “Women as Queer Nationals,” *Outlook: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly* 11 (Winter 1991): 20–23; Deborah Schwartz, “Queers Bash Back,” *Gay Community News*, Monday, 24 June 1990: 14–15; Randy Shilts, “The Queering of America,” *The Advocate* 567 (1 Jan. 1991): 32–38; Guy Trebay, “In Your Face,” *Village Voice*, 14 Aug. 1990, 35–39.

2. Bérubé and Escoffier, “Queer/Nation,” 13–14.

3. These affinity groups include ASLUT, “Artists Slaving Under Tyranny”; DORIS SQUASH, “Defending Our Rights in the Streets, Super Queers United Against Savage Heterosexuals”; GHOST, “Grand Homosexual Organization to Stop Televangelists”; HI MOM, “Homosexual Ideological Mobilization Against the Military”; LABIA, “Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action”; QUEER PLANET, an environmental group; QUEER STATE, which deals with state governments; QUEST, “Queers Undertaking Exquisite and Symbolic Transformation”; SHOP, “Suburban Homosexual Outreach Program”; UNITED COLORS, which focuses on experiences of queers of color. For the extended list, see Bérubé and Escoffier, “Queer/Nation,” 15.

allure of nationalism and capitalism, Queer Nation operates precisely in the American mode.⁴

In this article, we seek to understand the political logic of Queer Nationality and to trace the movement's spectacular intentions and effects. We will, in the next three sections, describe Queer Nation in its strongest tactical moments, as when it exploits the symbolic designs of mass and national culture in order to dismantle the standardizing apparatus that organizes all manner of sexual practice into "facts" of sexual *identity*,⁵ as when it mobilizes a radically wide range of knowledge—modes of understanding from science to gossip—to reconstitute information about queerness, thus transforming the range of reference "queer" has by multiplying its specifications.⁶ Whether or not Queer Nation survives as an organization past the present tense of our writing,⁷ the movement provides us with these discursive political tactics not simply as fodder for history but also as a kind of incitement to reformulate the conditions under which further interventions

4. Our construction of the manifold publics, polities, and symbolic cultures that traverse American life emanates from a number of sources: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983); Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Alice Echols, *Born to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Elizabeth Freeman, "Pitmarks on the History of the Country: The Epidemic of Nationalism in Hawthorne's 'Lady Eleanore's Mantle'" (unpublished manuscript, University of Chicago, 1990); George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986); Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Iris Marion Young, "Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship," *Ethics* 9 (January 1989): 250–74, and *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

5. For the political need to postminoritize cultural experience through the manipulation of representational codes, see David Lloyd, "Genet's Genealogy: European Minorities and the Ends of the Canon," in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, ed. Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 369–93.

6. Three essays that argue for the need to re-taxonomize sexual identity have inspired this essay: Esther Newton and Shirley Walton, "The Misunderstanding: Toward a More Precise Sexual Vocabulary," in *Pleasure and Danger*, ed. Carole Vance (Boston: Routledge, 1984), 242–50; Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex," in *Pleasure and Danger*, 267–314; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1–63.

7. This death knell was sounded as early as June 1991, in Toronto, according to *Xtra!*, a Toronto publication. Cited in "Quotelines," *Outlines* 5, no. 1 (June 1991): 7. We have since heard that reports of its death have been greatly exaggerated.

into the juridical, policy, and popular practices of contemporary America must be thought and made.⁸

This demands an expanded politics of description. We might say, "an expanded politics of *erotic* description," but crucial to a sexually radical movement for social change is the transgression of categorical distinctions between sexuality and politics, with their typically embedded divisions between public, private, and personal concerns. The multiplicity of social spaces, places where power and desire are enacted and transferred, need to be disaggregated and specified. The abstract, disembodied networks of electronic visual, aural, and textual communication, the nationalized systems of juridical activity and official public commentary, the state and local political realms that are not at all simply microcosmic of the national: All coexist with both the manifestly pleasuring or moneymaking embodiments of local, national, and global capitalism, and with the random or customary interactions of social life—this sentence could, and must, go on interminably. These spaces are hard to describe, because they are all unbounded, dialectically imagined, sometimes powerful, and sometimes irrelevant to the theory, practice, and transformation of sexual hegemony. Whatever they are, at the moment they are resolutely national. Queer Nation's nationalist-style camp counterpolitics incorporates this discursive and territorial problem, shifting between a utopian politics of identity, difference, dispersion, and specificity and a pluralist agenda, in the liberal sense, that imagines a "gorgeous mosaic" of difference without a model of conflict. Our final section, "With *You* Out We're Nothing," supports and extends Queer Nation's contestation of existing cultural spaces but seeks to reopen the question of nationalism's value as an infidel model of transgression and resistance, for the very naturalizing stereotypes of official nationality can inflect even the most radical insurgent forms. In other words, this is an anti-assimilationist narrative about an anti-assimilationist movement. It must be emphasized, however, that disidentification with U.S. nationality is not, at this moment, even a theoretical option for queer citizens: As long as PWAs require state support, as long as the official nation invests its identity in the pseudo-right to police nonnormative sexual representations and sexual practices, the lesbian, gay, feminist, and queer communities in the United States do not have the privilege to disregard national identity. We are compelled, then, to read America's lips. What can we do to force the officially constituted nation to speak a new political tongue?

8. See Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 135–70.

Recently, official America has sought to manage an explicit relation between national power and the vulnerable body by advertising an unironic consecration of masculine military images and surgical incisions into the borders of other sovereign nations. Queer Nation, in dramatic contrast, produces images in response to the massive violence against racial, sexual, gendered, and impoverished populations within the U.S. borders, a violence emblemized by, but in no way limited to, the federal response to AIDS. A brief history of the movement will help to explain the genesis of its polymorphous impulses. Founded at an ACT UP New York meeting in April 1990, Queer Nation aimed to extend the kinds of democratic counterpolitics deployed on behalf of AIDS activism for the transformation of public sexual discourse in general. Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston's *AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS* is to date the fullest and most graphic record of ACT UP's intervention into local, state, and national systems of power and publicity.⁹ This specification of mainstream sites of power was made necessary by federal stonewalling on the subject of AIDS treatment, support, and education among institutions in the political public sphere, where the bureaucratic norm is to disavow accountability to vulnerable populations. ACT UP recognizes the necessity to master the specific functions of political bureaucracies and to generate loud demands that these live up to their promise to all of "the people." Among other strategies, it exploits the coincidence between national and commercial spectacle by pirating advertising techniques: An alliance with the political artists called Gran Fury has produced a sophisticated poster campaign to transform the passive public space of New York into a zone of political pedagogy. Queer Nation takes from ACT UP this complex understanding of political space as fundamental to its insistence on making all public spheres truly safe for all of the persons who occupy them, not just in psychic loyalty but in everyday and embodied experience. To be safe in the national sense means not just safe from bashing, not just safe from discrimination, but safe *for* demonstration, in the mode of patriotic ritual, which always involves a deployment of affect, knowledge, spectacle, and crucially, a kind of banality, ordinariness, and popularity:

Through its activism Queer Nation seeks to redefine the community—its rights, its visibility—and take it into what's been claimed as straight political and social space. "QUEERS READ THIS" asks to be read as the accompanying declaration of nationalism. It says: In

9. Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, *AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990).

this culture, being queer means you've been condemned to death; appreciate our power and our bond; realize that whenever one of us is hurt we all suffer; know that we have to fight for ourselves because no one else will. It says, this is why we are a *nation* of queers, and why you must feel yourself a part. Its language seems to borrow from other, equally "threatening" power movements—black nationalist, feminist separatist.¹⁰

The key to the paradoxes of Queer Nation is the way it *exploits* internal difference. That is, QN understands the propriety of queerness to be a function of the diverse spaces in which it aims to become explicit. It names multiple local and national publics; it does not look for a theoretical coherence to regulate in advance all of its tactics: all politics in the Queer Nation are imagined on the *street*. Finally, it always refuses closeting strategies of assimilation and goes for the broadest and most explicit assertion of presence. This loudness involves two main kinds of public address: internal, for the production of safe collective Queer spaces, and external, in a cultural pedagogy emblemized by the post-Black Power slogan "We're Here. We're Queer. Get Used to It." If "I'm Black and I'm Proud" sutures the first-person performative to racial visibility, transforming the speaker from racial object to ascendant subject, Queer Nation's slogan stages the shift from silent absence into present speech, from nothingness to collectivity, from a politics of embodiment to one of space, whose power erupts from the ambiguity of "here." Where?

Inside: I Hate Straights, and Other "Queeritual" Prayers

Nancy Fraser's recent essay on postmodernity and identity politics argues that countercultural groups engage in a dialectic with mainstream public culture, shifting between internal self-consolidation and reinvestment of the relatively essentialist "internal" identity into the normalizing discussions of the mass public sphere.¹¹ In this dialectic, the subaltern indeed becomes a speaking player in her own public identity, for the public is an intelligibly "dominant" space characterized by collective norms. Fraser's model does not work for Queer Nation, which neither recognizes a single internal or privatized interest nor certifies one mainstream whose disposition

10. See Kaplan, "A Queer Manifesto," 36; Kaplan's emphasis.

11. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 56–80.

constitutes the terrain for counterpolitics. This distinguishing mark of Queer Nation—its capacity to include cultural resistance, opposition, and subcultural consolidation in a mix of tactics from identity politics and postmodern metropolitan information flows—will thus govern our inside narrative. We will shuttle between a dispersed variety of Queer National events, falsely bringing into narrative logic and collective intentionality what has been a deliberately unsystematized politics.

If there is one manifesto of this polyvocal movement, defining the lamination of a gay liberation politics and new gay power tactics, it is, famously, the “I Hate Straights” polemic distributed as a broadside at the Gay Pride parades in New York and Chicago in the summer of 1990. “I Hate Straights,” printed (at least in Chicago) over the image of a raised clenched masculine fist, is a monologue, a slave narrative without decorum, a manifesto of rage and its politics. Gone, the assimilationist patience of some gay liberation identity politics; gone, the assertive rationality of the “homosexual” subject who seeks legitimacy by signifying, through “straight” protocols, that “civilization” has been sighted on the cultural margin.¹²

“I Hate Straights,” instead, “proceeds in terms of the unavoidable usefulness of something that is very dangerous.”¹³ What is dangerous is rage, and the way it is deployed both to an “internal” audience of gay subjects and an “external” straight world. The broadside begins with personal statements: “I have friends. Some of them are straight. Year after year, I see my straight friends. I want to see them, to see how they are doing . . . [and] [y]ear after year I continue to realize that the facts of my life are irrelevant to them and that I am only half listened to.” The speaker remains unheard, because straights refuse to believe that gay subjects are in exile from privilege, from ownership of a point of view that American social institutions and popular cultural practices secure: “Insiders claim that [gays] already are” included in the privileges of the straight world. But gay subjects are excluded from the privileges of procreation, of family, of the public

12. Identity is linked to territorialization, both geographical and ideological. We mean to offer an account of a subcultural *topology*, a description of how modern space requires negotiating a complex relation between situated identities and mobilized *identifications*. The shifting terrain in the meaning of the phrase *gay community* symptomatized in Queer Nation’s practices has been splendidly explicated by Richard Herrell’s “Symbolic Strategies of Chicago’s Gay and Lesbian Pride Day Parade,” in Gilbert Herdt, ed., *The Culture of Gay Men* (forthcoming).

13. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “In a Word. *Interview*,” *Differences* 1 (Summer 1989): 129.

fantasy that circulates through these institutions: Indeed, it seems that only the public discipline of gayness keeps civilization from "melt[ing] back into the primeval ooze."

In the face of an exile caused by this arrogant heterosexual presumption of domestic space and privilege, the speaker lights into a list of proclamations headed by "I hate straights": "I" hates straights on behalf of the gay people who have to emotionally "take care" of the straights who feel guilty for their privilege; "I" hates straights for requiring the sublimation of gay rage as the price of their beneficent tolerance. "'You'll catch more flies with honey,'" the speaker hears; "Now look who's generalizing," they say, as if the minoritized group itself had invented the "crude taxonomy" under which it labored.¹⁴ In response, the flyer argues, "BASH BACK . . . LET YOURSELF BE ANGRY . . . THAT THERE IS NO PLACE IN THIS COUNTRY WHERE WE ARE SAFE."

The speaker's designation of "country" as the space of danger complexly marks the indices of social identity through which this invective circulates. "I" mentions two kinds of "we": gay and American subjects, all of whom have to "thank President Bush for planting a fucking tree" in public, while thousands of PWAs die for lack of political visibility. Here, the nation of the Bush and the tree becomes a figure of nature that includes the malignant neglect of AIDS populations, including, and especially (here), gay men. Straights ask the gay community to self-censor, because anger is not "productive": Meanwhile, the administrators of straight America commit omissions of policy to assert that healthy heterosexual identity (the straight and undiseased body) is a prerequisite to citizenship of the United States. The treatise goes on to suggest that the national failure to secure justice for all citizens is experienced locally, in public spaces where physical gay bashing takes place, and in even more intimate sites like the body: "Go tell [straights to] go away until they have spent a month walking hand in hand in public with someone of the same sex. After they survive that, then you'll hear what they have to say about queer anger. Otherwise, tell them to shut up and listen."

The distribution of this document to a predominantly gay population at Gay Pride parades underscores a fundamental Queer Nation policy. *Visibility* is critical if a safe public existence is to be forged for American gays, for whom the contemporary nation has no positive political value. The cities where Queer Nation lives already contain local gay communities, locales

14. See Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 1–63.

that secure spaces of safe embodiment for capital and sexual expenditures. For Queer Nation, they also constitute sites within which political bases can be founded. This emphasis on safe spaces, secured for bodies by capital and everyday life practices also, finally, constitutes a refusal of the terms national discourse uses to frame the issue of sexuality: "Being queer is not about a right to privacy: it is about the freedom to be public . . . [i]t's not about the mainstream, profit-margins, patriotism, patriarchy or being assimilated. . . . Being queer is 'grass roots' because we know that everyone of us, every body, every cunt, every heart and ass and dick is a world of pleasure waiting to be explored. Everyone of us is a world of infinite possibility." Localness, here transposed into the language of worldness, is dedicated to producing a new politics from the energy of a sentimentally and erotically excessive sexuality. The ambiguities of this sexual geography are fundamental to producing the new referent, a gay community whose erotics and politics are transubstantial. Meanwhile, in the hybrid Queer/American nation, orthodox forms of political agency linger, in modified form: For example, Queer Nation proclaims, "An army of lovers cannot lose!" But this military fantasy refers in its irony to a set of things: counterviolences in local places, sixties movements to make love, not war, and also the invigorated persecution of queer subjects in the United States military during the Reagan/Bush years.

Thus, too, the self-proclaimed "Queeritual" element in some Queer Nation productions exceeds secular American proprieties, as in broadsides that replace "I pledge allegiance to the flag" with "I praise life with my vulva" and "I praise God with my erection."¹⁵ Although we might say that this queer-itality is reactionary, reflecting a suprapolitical move to spiritual identity, we might also say that this is literally conservative, an attempt to save space for hope, prayer, and simple human relations—a Queer Nation "Now I lay me down to sleep." These pieties assert the luck the praying subjects feel to be sleeping with someone of their own sex, thus promoting homosexuality in the way Queer Nation wants to do, as a mode of ordinary identification and pleasure. But these prayers also parody the narrative convention of normative prayer to find a safe space for eluding official and conventional censorship of public sexuality: *Thing* magazine reports, indeed, that

15. We cite the texts in their entirety. "I Praise Life": "I praise life with my vulva. I thank the gods for all the women who have kissed my lips. I praise life." "I Praise God": "I praise God with my erection. I thank God for all the men I've slept with. I praise God." They were created in 1990 by Joe Lindsay of Queer Nation Denver.

the broadside has come under criticism for seeming to promote promiscuity.¹⁶ In our view, the prayers counter the erotophobia of gay and straight publics who want to speak of “lifestyles” and not of sex. Finally, just as the genre of the circulating broadside reveals how gay and straight populations topographically overlap, so does this use of prayer itself avow the futility of drawing comprehensive affective boundaries between gay and straight subjects. Queer Nation’s emphasis on public language and media, its exploitation of the tension between local embodiment and mass abstraction, forfeits the possibility of such taxonomic clarity.

Outside: Politics in Your Face

On February 23, 1967, in a congressional hearing concerning the security clearance of gay men for service in the Defense Department, a psychiatrist named Dr. Charles Socarides testified that the homosexual “does not know the boundary of his own body. He does not know where his body ends and space begins.”¹⁷ Precisely, the spiritual and other moments of internal consolidation that we have described allow the individual bodies of Queer Nationals to act as visibly queer flash cards, in an ongoing project of cultural pedagogy aimed at exposing the range and variety of bounded spaces upon which heterosexual supremacy depends. Moving out from the psychological and physical safe spaces it creates, Queer Nation broadcasts the straightness of public space, and hence its explicit or implicit danger to gays. The queer body—as an agent of publicity, as a unit of self-defense, and finally as a spectacle of ecstasy—becomes the locus where mainstream culture’s discipline of gay citizens is written and where the pain caused by this discipline is transformed into rage and pleasure. Using alternating strategies of menace and merriment, agents of Queer Nation have come to see and conquer places that present the danger of *violence* to gays and lesbians, to reterritorialize them.

Twenty-three years after Dr. Socarides’ mercifully brief moment of fame, New Yorkers began to display on their chests a graphic interpretation of his fear for the national defense. The tee shirt they wore portrays a silhouette of the United States, with the red tint of the East Coast and the blue tint of the West Coast fading and blending in the middle. Suddenly, the heartland of the country is a shocking new shade of Queer: Red, white, and

16. Robert Ford, “Sacred Sex: Art Erects Controversy,” *Thing 4* (Spring 1991): 4.

17. John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 216.

blue make lavender. This, Queer Nation's first tee shirt, extends the project of an earlier graphic produced by Adam Rolston, which shows a placard that reads "I Am Out, Therefore I Am." But Queer Nation's shirt locates the public space in which the individual Cartesian subject must be out, transforming that space in order to survive. Queer Nation's design maps a psychic and bodily territory—lavender territory—that cannot be colonized and expands it to include, potentially, the entire nation. This lamination of the country to the body conjoins individual and national liberation: Just as Dr. Socarides dreaded, the boundaries between what constitutes individual and what constitutes national space are explicitly blurred. "National Defense" and "Heterosexual Defense" become interdependent projects of boundary maintenance that Queer Nation graphically undermines, showing that these colors *will* run.

While the Queer Nation shirt exploits heterosexist fears of the "spread of a lifestyle" through dirty laundry by publicizing its wearer as both a gay native and a missionary serving the spread of homosexuality, not all of their tactics are this benign. The optimistic assertion that an army of lovers cannot lose masks the seriousness with which Queer Nation has responded to the need for a pseudo-militia on the order of the Guardian Angels. The Pink Panthers, initially conceived of at a Queer Nation meeting (they are now a separate organization), provided a searing response to the increased violence that has accompanied the general increase of gay visibility in America. The Panthers, a foot patrol that straddles the "safe spaces" described in the first section and the "unsafe spaces" of public life in America, not only defend other queer bodies but aim to be a continual reminder of them. Dressed in black tee shirts with pink triangles enclosing a black paw print, they move unarmed in groups, linked by walkie-talkies and whistles. In choosing a uniform that explicitly marks them as targets, as successors of the Black Power movement, and as seriocomic detectives, the Panthers bring together the abstract threat implicit in the map graphic described above, the embodied threat implicit in individual queers crossing their subcultural boundaries, and the absurdity that founds this condition of sexual violence.

The Panthers' slogan is "Bash Back." It announces that the locus of gay oppression has shifted from the legal to the extralegal arena, and from national-juridical to ordinary everyday forms.¹⁸ The menace of "Bash Back" reciprocates the menace of physical violence that keeps gays and lesbians

18. John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *The Powers of Desire*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 108.

invisible and/or physically restricted to their mythically safe neighborhoods. But rather than targeting specific gay bashers or lashing out at random heterosexuals, the Panthers train in self-defense techniques and travel unarmed: "Bash Back" simply intends to mobilize the threat gay bashers use so effectively—strength not in numbers but in the presence of a few bodies who represent the potential for widespread violence—against the bashers themselves. In this way, the slogan turns the bodies of the Pink Panthers into a psychic counterthreat, expanding their protective shield beyond the confines of their physical "beat." Perhaps the most assertive bashing that the uniformed bodies of the Pink Panthers deliver is mnemonic. Their spectacular presence counters heterosexual culture's will not to recognize its own intense need to reign in a sexually pure environment.

While the rage of "Bash Back" responds to embodied and overt violence, Queer Nation's "Queer Nights Out" redress the more diffuse and implicit violence of sexual conventionality by mimicking the hackneyed forms of straight social life. Queer Nights Out are moments of radical desegregation with roots in the civil rights era lunch counter sit-ins; whereas the sixties' sit-ins addressed legal segregation, these queer sorties confront customary segregation. Invading straight bars, for example, they stage a production of sentimentality and pleasure that broadcasts the ordinariness of the queer body. The banality of twenty-five same-sex couples making out in a bar, the silliness of a group of fags playing spin the bottle, efface the distance crucial to the ordinary pleasures straight society takes in the gay world. Neither informational nor particularly spectacular, Queer Nights Out demonstrate two ominous truths to heterosexual culture: (1) gay sexual identity is no longer a reliable foil for straightness; and (2) what looked like bounded gay subcultural activity has itself become restless and improvisatory, taking its pleasures in a theater near you.

Queer Nights Out have also appropriated the model of the surprise attack, which the police have traditionally used to show gays and lesbians that even the existence of their subcultural spaces is contingent upon the goodwill of straights. Demonstrating that the boundedness of heterosexual spaces is also contingent upon the (enforced) willingness of gays to remain invisible, queers are thus using exhibitionism to make public space psychically unsafe for unexamined heterosexuality. In one report from the field, two lesbians were sighted sending a straight woman an oyster, adding a Sapphic Appetizer to the menu of happy hour delights. The straight woman was not amused.¹⁹ Embarrassment was generated—the particular

19. Trebay, "In Your Face," 36.

embarrassment liberals suffer when the sphere allotted to the tolerated exceeds the boundaries "we all agree upon." Maneuvers such as this reveal that straight mating techniques, supposed to be "Absolutly Het," are sexual lures available to any brand of pleasure: "Sorry, you looked like a dyke to me."²⁰ This political transgression of "personal space" can even be used to deflect the violence it provokes. Confronted by a defensive and hostile drunk, a QN gayboy addresses the room: "Yeah, I had him last night, and he was terrible."

In this place of erotic exchange, the army of lovers takes as its war strategies "some going down and butt-fucking and other theatricals."²¹ The genitals become not just organs of erotic thanksgiving but weapons of pleasure against their own oppression. These kinds of militant-erotic interventions take their most public form in the Queer Nation kiss-in, in which an official space, such as a city plaza, is transfused with the juices of unofficial enjoyment: Embarrassment, pleasure, spectacle, longing, and accusation interarticulate to produce a public scandal that is, as the following section will reveal, Queer Nation's specialty.

Hyperspace: "Try Me On, I'm Very You"²²

In its most postmodern moments, Queer Nation takes on a corporate strategy in order to exploit the psychic unboundedness of consumers who depend upon products to articulate, produce, and satisfy their desires. Queer Nation tactically uses the hyperspaces created by the corporate trademark, the metropolitan parade, the shopping mall, print media, and, finally, advertising to recognize and to take advantage of the consumer's pleasure in vicarious identification. In this guise, the group commandeers permeable sites, apparently apolitical spaces through which the public circulates in a pleasurable consensual exchange of bodies, products, identities, and information. Yet, it abandons the conciliatory mode of, for instance, Kirk and Madsen's plan to market "positive" (read "tolerable") gay images to straight culture.²³ Instead, it aims to produce a series of elabo-

20. The "Absolutly Het" series, parodies of the ads for Absolut vodka, were produced by the anonymous group OUTPOST.

21. Trebay, "In Your Face," 39.

22. From Deee-Lite's song, "Try Me On, I'm Very You," on the album *World Clique*. Elektra Entertainment, 1990.

23. Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen, *After the Ball: How America Will Conquer its Fear and Hatred of Gays in the '90s* (New York: Doubleday, 1989). Kirk and Madsen advise the gay community to present nonthreatening images of homosexuality to straight culture,

rate blue-light specials on the queer body. The Queer National corporate strategy—to reveal to the consumer desires he/she didn't know he/she had, to make his/her identification with the product "homosexuality" both an unsettling and a pleasurable experience—makes consumer pleasure central to the transformation of public culture, thus linking the utopian promises of the commodity with those of the nation.

One particular celebrity oscillates between local/embodied and corporate/abstract sexual identification: "Queer Bart" stars on a tee shirt produced by Queer Nation in the summer of 1990. Queer Bart reconfigures Matt Groening's bratty white suburban "anykid," Bart Simpson, into the New York gay clone: He wears an earring, his own Queer Nation tee shirt, and a pink triangle button. The balloon coming out of his mouth reads, "Get used to it, dude!" Like all bodies, Queer Bart's body is a product that serves a number of functions. In the first place, he provides a countercontext to the apparent harmlessness of the suburban American generic body: Queer Nation's Bart implicitly points a finger at another bootleg tee shirt, on which Bart snarls, "Back off, faggot!" and at the heterosexuality that Normal Bart's generic identity assumes. In the second place, the original Bart's "clone-ness," when inflected with an "exceptional" identity—Black Bart, Latino Bart, and so on—not only stages the ability of subcultures to fashion cultural insiderhood for their members but also reinscribes subcultural identity into mainstream style. The exuberant inflection of Bart Simpson as queer speaks to the pleasures of assuming an official normative identity, signified on the body, for those whom dominant culture consistently represents as exceptional.

Queer Nation's reinflection of Bart's body, which, precisely because it is a body, readily lends itself to any number of polymorphously perverse identities, graphically demonstrates that the commodity is a central means by which individuals tap into the collective experience of public desire. Queer Bart, himself a trademark, is a generic body stamped with Queer Nation's own trademarked aesthetic, which then allows the consumer to publicly identify him- herself as a member of a trademarked "nation."²⁴ Thus,

a "marketing campaign" designed to win mainstream approval for the bourgeois homosexual at the cost of eliminating drag queens, butch lesbians, transsexuals, etc., from visibility.

24. For a discussion of the relationship between the trademark, commodity identification, and the colonized American body, see Lauren Berlant, "National Brands/National Body: Imitation of Life," in *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text, Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. Hortense J. Spillers (Boston: Routledge, 1991), 110–40.

Bart embodies the non-spaces we will discuss in the following paragraphs: His own unboundedness as a commodity identity exploits the way that the fantasy of being something else merges with the stereotype to confer an endlessly shifting series of identities upon the consumer's body.²⁵

The genealogy of the Queer Bart strategy extends from the Gay Pride parades of the 1970s, when, for the first time, gay bodies organized into a visible public ritual. In addition to offering gays and lesbians an opportunity to experience their private identities in an official spectacle, the parades also offered flamboyant and ordinary homosexuality as something the heterosexual spectator could encounter without having to go underground—to drag shows or gay bars—for voyeuristic pleasure or casual sex.²⁶ In the last twenty years, the representation of “gayness” in the Gay Pride parade has changed, for its marching population is no longer defined by sexual practice alone. Rather, the current politicization of gay issues in the metropolitan and civic public spheres has engendered broadly based alliances, such that progressive “straights” can pass as “queer” in their collective political struggles.²⁷ As a result, the Gay Pride parade no longer produces the ominous gust of an enormous closet door opening; its role in consolidating identity varies widely, depending on what kind of communication participants think the parade involves. While Gay Pride parades have not yet achieved the status in mainstream culture of, for instance, St. Patrick's Day parades (in which people “go Irish for a day” by dressing in green), they have become pluralistic and inclusive, involving approval-seeking, self-consolidating, and saturnalian and transgressive moments of spectacle.²⁸ Although Queer Nation marches in traditional Gay Pride parades, it has updated and complicated the strategy of the parade, recognizing that the planned, distanced, and ultimately contained nature of the form offers only momentary displacement of heterosexual norms: After all, one can choose not to go to a parade, or one can watch the scene go by without becoming even an imaginary participant.

25. A powerful and extensive exploration of the role of this “stereotyped fantasy body” in the black gay voguing subculture is provided by Jenny Livingston's documentary film, *Paris is Burning*. See also Berlant, “National Brands/National Body.”

26. On the history of the Gay Pride parade, see D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*.

27. See Ross, *No Respect*.

28. See Richard Herrell, “Symbolic Strategies.” Herrell discusses how Chicago politicians annually assume at the parade pseudo-Irish last names, such as “Mayor Richard O'Daley.” The stigma attached to various cultural groups might well be discerned by such a litmus test: The unthinkable prospect of “Mayor Richard Gayley” suggests that there is, as yet, no such thing as “honorary” symbolic homosexuality.

In parades through urban American downtowns, Queer Nationals often chant, "We're here, we're queer, we're not going shopping." But shopping itself provides the form of a tactic when Queer Nation enters another context: The Queer Shopping Network of New York and the Suburban Homosexual Outreach Program (SHOP) of San Francisco have taken the relatively bounded spectacle of the urban pride parade to the ambient pleasures of the shopping mall. "Mall visibility actions" thus conjoin the spectacular lure of the parade with Hare Krishna-style conversion and proselytizing techniques. Stepping into malls in hair-gelled splendor, holding hands and handing out fliers, the queer auxiliaries produce an "invasion" that conveys a different message: "We're here, we're queer, *you're* going shopping."

These miniature parades transgress an erotically, socially, and economically complex space. Whereas patrons of the straight bar, at least, understand its function in terms of pleasure and desire, mall-goers invest in the shopping mall's credentials as a "family" environment, an environment that "creates a nostalgic image of [the] town center as a clean, safe, legible place."²⁹ In dressing up and stepping out queer, the Network uses the bodies of its members as billboards to create what Mary Ann Doane calls "the desire to desire."³⁰ As Queer Shoppers stare back, kiss, and pose, they disrupt the antiseptic asexual surface of the malls, exposing them as sites of any number of explicitly sexualized exchanges—cruising, people-watching, window-shopping, trying on outfits, the purchasing of commodities, and having anonymous sex.³¹

The inscription of metropolitan sexuality in a safe space for suburban-style normative sexual repression is just one aspect of the Network's critical pedagogy. In addition, mall actions exploit the utopian function of the mall, which connects information about commodities with sensual expressivity and which predicts that new erotic identities can be sutured to spectacular consuming bodies. The Queer Shopping Network understands the most banal of advertising strategies: sex sells. In this case, though, sex sells not

29. See Anne Friedberg, "Flaneurs du Mal(l)," *PMLA* 106 (May 1991): 419–31. Whereas Friedberg analyzes the mall as theater, an illusory and ultimately nonparticipatory realm, we would argue that "mall erotics" extend beyond the consumer/commodity exchange she describes to include visual consumption of other people as products.

30. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

31. A letter in *Raunch* reveals that Southglenn Mall in Denver, Colorado, where guess-which-one-of-us hung out every Saturday for her entire adolescence, also used to contain one of the best arrays of glory holes in the country. Imagine my delight. Boyd McDonald, *Raunch* (Boston: Fidelity Publishing, 1990).

substitutions for bodily pleasures—a car, a luxury scarf—but the capacity of the body itself to experience unofficial pleasures. While the Network appears to be merely handing out another commodity in the form of broadsides about homosexuality, its ironic awareness of itself as being on display links gay spectacle with the window displays that also entreat the buyers. Both say “buy me”; but the Queer Shopping Network tempts consumers with a commodity that, if they could recognize it, they already own: a sexually inflected and explicitly desiring body. Ultimately, the mall spectacle addresses the consumer’s own “perverse” desire to experience a different body and offers *itself* as the most stylish of the many attitudes on sale in the mall.

Queer Nation exploits the mall’s coupling of things and bodies by transgressively disclosing that this bounded, safe commercial space is also an information system where sexual norms and cultural identities are consolidated, thus linking it with Queer Nation’s final frontier, the media. As it enters the urban media cacophony, Queer Nation scatters original propaganda in the form of graffiti, wheatpasted posters, and fliers into existing spaces of collective, anonymous discursive exchange. While the mall circulates and exchanges bodies, print media circulates and exchanges information in the most disembodied of spaces. Queer Nation capitalizes on the abstract/informational apparatus of the media in a few ways, refunctioning its spaces for an ongoing “urban redecoration project” on behalf of gay visibility.³² First, it manipulates the power of modern media to create and to disseminate cultural norms and other political propaganda: QN leeches, we might say, onto the media’s socializing function. Second, QN’s abundant interventions into sexual publicity playfully invoke and resist the lure of monumentality, frustrating the tendency of sexual subcultures to convert images of radical sexuality into new standards of transgression.

In addition to manufacturing its own information, Queer Nation’s mass mediation takes on a more ironic “Madison Avenue” mode, “queering” advertisements so that they become vehicles of protest against and arrogations of a media that renders queerness invisible, sanitary, or spectacularly fetishized. More ambiguous than the tradition of political defacement from which it descends—feminist spray-painting of billboards with phrases like “this offends women,” for example³³—Queer Nation’s glossy pseudo-advertisements involve replication, exposure, and disruption of even the

32. We first heard this phrase at Queer Nation Chicago, Spring 1991.

33. See Jill Posener’s photoessay on the British and Australian feminist billboard spray-painting movement, in *Louder than Words* (New York: Pandora Press, 1986).

semiotic boundaries between gay and straight. The group's parodies and reconstructions of mainstream ads inflect products with a sexuality and promote homosexuality as a product: They lay bare the queerness of the commodities that straight culture makes and buys, either translating it from its hidden form in the original or revealing and ameliorating its calculated erasure. In short, the most overtly commercial of Queer Nation's campaigns, true to the American way, makes queer good by making goods queer.

One form this project takes is an "outing" of corporate economic interest in "market segments" with which corporations refuse to identify explicitly. The New York Gap series changes the final *P* in the logo of stylish ads featuring gay, bisexual, and suspiciously polymorphous celebrities to a *Y*. For the insider, these acts "out" the closeted gay and bisexual semi-celebrities the Gap often uses as models. But the reconstructed billboards also address the company's policy of using gay style to sell clothes without acknowledging debts to gay street style: Style itself is "outed," as are the straight urban consumers who learn that the clothes they wear signify gay.

Whereas the Gap ads confront both the closetedness of a corporation and the semiotic incoherence of straight consumer culture, another series addresses the class implications of advertising's complicity in the national moral bankruptcy. A series of parody Lotto ads exposes the similarities and differences between the national betrayal of poor and of gay citizens. The "straight" versions of a series of advertisements for New York's Lotto depict generic citizens of various assimilated genders and ethnicities, who voice their fantasies about sudden wealth underneath the caption "All You Need is a Dollar Bill and a Dream." The ads conflate citizenship and purchase, suggesting that working-class or ethnic Americans can realize the American dream through spending money. One of Queer Nation's parody ads shows an "ordinary citizen" in one of the frank, casual head-and-shoulders poses that characterize the real ads. The caption reads, "I'd start my own cigarette company and call it Fags." The Queer Nation logo appears, along with the slogan "All You Need is a Three-Dollar Bill and a Dream." Again, the ads link citizenship with capitalist gain, but the ironized American dream cliché also establishes the group's resistance to a liberal "gay business" approach to social liberation, in whose view capitalist legitimation neutralizes social marginality. QN recognizes that the three-dollar bill remains nonnegotiable tender. The transformed caption reveals that the lottery's fundamental promise does not hold true for the nation's gay citizens in terms of the freedom to pursue sexual pleasure, which costs more than any jackpot or bank account has ever amassed.

In posing as a countercorporation, a business with its own logo, corporate identity, and ubiquity, Queer Nation seizes and dismantles the privileges of corporate anonymity.³⁴ It steals the privilege that this anonymity protects, that of avoiding painful recrimination for corporate actions. As it peels the facade of corporate neutrality, Queer Nation reveals that businesses are people with political agendas, and that consumers are citizens to whom businesses are accountable for more than the quality of their specific products: Abstracting itself, Queer Nation embodies the corporation. The Lotto ad finally promises an alternative to the capitalist dream machine: Its Queer Nation logo, juxtaposed against the "All You Need is a Three-Dollar Bill and a Dream" caption, appeals to the consumer to invest in its own "corporate" identity.

The Queer Nation logo itself, then, becomes a mock twin to existing national corporate logos: Just as red, white, and blue "Buy USA" labels, yellow ribbons, and flag icons have, by commodifying patriotism, actually managed to strengthen it, so does the spread of Queer Nation's merchandise and advertising expand its own territory of promises.³⁵ Because Gap clothes and lottery fantasies confer identities as much as flag kitsch does, Queer Nation has the additional power to expose or transform the meaning of these and other commodities—not simply through the reappropriation that camp enacts on an individual level but through collective mimicry, replication, and invasion of the pseudo-identities generated by corporations, including the nation itself.

Queer Nation's infusion of consumer space with a queer sensibility and its recognition of the potential for exploiting spaces of psychic and physical permeability are fundamental to its radical reconstitution of citizenship. For in the end, an individual's understanding of himself as "American" and/or as "straight" involves parallel problems of consent and local control: Both identities demand psychic and bodily discipline in exchange

34. Paradoxically, actual corporations have in turn exploited Queer Nation's/Gran Fury's recognizable style to produce mock gay ads, such as the Kikit billboard, which portrays two "lesbians"—actually an androgynous heterosexual couple—kissing.

35. The *New York Times* devoted a full section to paid advertisements supporting the Persian Gulf invasion and to commercial ads linking patriotism with purchase. Included were an ad for a Steuben glass flag paperweight, a Bloomingdale's spread saluting fathers' "devotion to family and country alike," and—in the most sinister pun of our times (apart from, perhaps, "Saddamize Hussein")—a Saks Fifth Avenue ad with the caption "A woman's place is in the home of the brave and the land of the free" (*New York Times*, Sunday, 9 June 1991).

for the protection, security, and power these identities confer. If the official nation extracts public libidinal pleasure as the cost of political identity, queer citizenship confers the right to one's own specific pleasures. In the final analysis, America, understood not as a geographic but as a symbolic locus in which individuals experience their fundamental link to 250 million other individuals, is the most unbounded of the hyperspaces we have been describing. The official transformation of national identity into style—of flag into transvestite “flagness”—offers Queer Nation a seamless means of transforming “queerness” into a camp counternationality, which makes good on the promise that the citizen will finally be allowed to own, in addition to all the other vicarious bodies Queer Nation has for sale, his mighty real, his very own national body.

With *You* Out We're Nothing, and Beyond

We have territorialized Queer Nation and described the production of a queer counterpublic out of traditional national icons, the official and useful spaces of everyday life, the ritual places of typical public pleasure (parades, malls, bars, and bodies), and the collective identities consumers buy in the mode of mass culture. The effect of casting gay urban life and practices as ongoing and scandalously ordinary is simultaneously to consolidate a safe space for gay subjects and also to dislocate utterly the normative sexual referent. If nationality as a form of fantasy and practice provides a legal and customary account of why American citizens in the abstract are secure as *heterosexuals*, Queer Nation exploits the disembodied structure of nationality by asserting that xenophobia would be precisely an inappropriate response for a straight community to have toward gay Americans. By asserting that straight and gay publics are coextensive with Americans at large, QN shows that the boundaries that might secure distinctions between sexual populations are local (like neighborhoods), normative (like taxonomies), and elastic (like latex). But these distinctions, in any event, must not be considered national, and in this sense Queer Nation's relay between everyday life and citizens' rights seems fitting.

Yet if Queer Nation tactically engages the postmodernity of information cultures, cutting across local and disembodied spaces of social identity and expressivity to reveal the communication that already exists between apparently bounded sexual and textual spaces, the campaign has not yet, in our view, left behind the fantasies of glamour and of homogeneity that characterize American nationalism itself. We might comment on the mas-

culine apriori that dominates even Queer spectacle; we might further comment on the relative weakness with which economic, racial, ethnic, and non-American cultures have been enfolded into queer counterpublicity.³⁶ In short, insofar as it assumes that "Queer" is the only insurgent "foreign" identity its citizens have, Queer Nation remains bound to the genericizing logic of American citizenship and to the horizon of an official formalism—one that equates sexual object choice with individual self-identity. We concede the need to acknowledge the names people use for themselves, even when they originate in the service of juridical and medical discipline. Popular forms of spectacle and self-understanding are crucial for building mass cultural struggle. But it is not enough to "include" women, lesbians, racial minorities, and so on in an ongoing machine of mass counternationality. Achieving the utopian promise of a Queer Symbolic³⁷ will involve more than a story of a multicultural sewing circle sewing the scraps of a pink triangle onto the American flag, or turning that flag, with its fifty times five potential small pink triangles, into a new desecrated emblem; more than a spectacle of young hard girl/woman flesh outing the pseudo-abstraction of masculine political fantasy. Queer culture's consent to national normativity must itself be made more provisional.

We have argued that America has already become marked by a camp aesthetic in the nineties. Camp America enrages, embarrasses, and sometimes benignly amuses official national figures and gives pleasure to the gay, the African American, the feminist, and the left-identified communities who understand that to operate a travesty on the national travesty is to dissolve the frame that separates national fantasy from ordinary bodies. But the verb *dissolve* is a temporal fantasy, of course: Tactical interventions, such as Dred Scott's flag doormat in Chicago's Art Institute or Kelly

36. Charles Fernandez, "Undocumented Aliens in the Queer Nation," *Out/Look* 12 (Spring 1991): 20–23.

37. Our reference to a "Queer Symbolic" follows Berlant's analysis of the official "National Symbolic," which coordinates political affect in American life and extends the notion of a political counter-lexicon to the current practices of Queer Nation. The National Symbolic is defined as "the order of discursive practices whose reign within a national space . . . transforms individuals into subjects of a collectively held history. Its traditional icons, its metaphors, its heroes, its rituals, and its narratives provide an alphabet for a collective consciousness or national subjectivity; through the National Symbolic, the historical nation aspires to achieve the inevitability of the status of natural law, a birthright. This pseudo-generic condition not only affects profoundly the citizen's subjective experience of her/his political rights, but also of civil life, private life, the life of the body itself" (Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy*, 20).

and Ronnie Cutrone's transformation of the flag into a sheet for polymorphous lovemaking in New York, have momentarily disintegrated national abstractness by turning bodies into national art and actually making censorship law look silly. These gestures were potentially dangerous and legally scandalous: But contained in museums/galleries, they depended on the usual protections of free high "artistic" expression to purchase the right to scandalize national iconography. At a time when existing laws against public and private sex are being newly enforced, the class distinction between sexual art and sex practices must be replaced by an insurgent renaming of sexuality *beyond* spectacle.

In other words, the exhibition of scandalous direct contact between oppositional stereotypes of iconic America and its internally constructed Others—say, between the "body" and the "nation"—solves as spectacle a problem of representation and power that is conceptually much harder to solve. But the indeterminate "we" from which we are writing, comfortable on neither side of most taxonomies, seek to occupy a space of a more complexly dimensional sexuality and political identity than these simple sutures suggest. This is, as Monique Wittig contends, not simply a question of "de-dramatiz[ing] these categories of language. . . . We must produce a political transformation of the key concepts, that is of the concepts which are strategic for us."³⁸ As a gesture toward mapping this unsanctioned terrain, let us return to the problem of Sandra Bernhard: her pasty body wrapped in the flag, her extremely (c)little "red corvette," and her desire to seduce cathartically an African American woman through a lesbian erotics that manipulates sentimentality, national parody, and aesthetic distance. This final seductive moment, when Bernhard "accidentally" stutters, "Without me/you I'm nothing," is framed by the "you" she addresses to the audience in the film's opening monologue. There, Bernhard wishes the impossible—that "you," the disembodied, autoerotic spectator, would traverse the space of aesthetic and celluloid distance to kiss her right "here," on a facial place where she points her finger; no such contact with the audience happens in the frame of the film. In the end, after the masquerade, the racial, regional, ethnic, and class drag, and during the American striptease, the film stages a response that goes beyond the star's original request: the generic black-woman-in-the-audience about whom the film has periodically fantasized in

38. Monique Wittig, "The Straight Mind," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 51–57.

nonnarrative, naturalistic segments writes on the café table with a lipstick, "FUCK SANDRA BERNHARD." This syntactically complex statement—a request, a demand, and an expletive—situates the black woman as an object of desire, as an author of feminine discourse, and as an image of the film's hopelessly absent audience: Her proximity to Bernhard's final lesbian-nationalist striptease thus suggests neither a purely sentimental "essentialist" lesbian spectacle, nor a postmodern consumer feminine autoerotics, nor a phallogcentrically inspired lust for lesbian "experience," but all of these, and more.

In this encounter, Bernhard tries to merge national camp with lesbian spectacle.³⁹ She produces scandalous erotic pleasure by undulating between the impossibility of laminating the flag onto her body and the equal impossibility of ever shedding the flag altogether: As she peels off her flag cape, she reveals three more in the form of a red, white, and blue sequined G-string and patriotic pasties, leaving us no reason to think that this exponential multiplication of flags would ever reach its limits. This undulation of the body and the flag, which eroticizes the latter as it nationalizes the former, is coterminous with the tease and the denial of the cross-race, homoerotic address to her consumer—the black-woman-in-the-audience. That is to say, the political liberation the flag promises and the sexual liberation its slipping off suggests makes a spectacle of the ambiguity with which these subjects live American sexuality.

Bernhard's refusal to resolve her feminine and sexual identities into a lesbian love narrative also illustrates how the eroticization of female spectacle in American public culture frustrates the political efficacy of transgressive representations for straight and lesbian women. The film imagines a kind of liberal pluralistic space for Bernhard's cross-margin, cross-fashion fantasy of women, but shows how lesbophobic that fantasy can be, insofar as it requires aesthetic distance—the straightness of the generic white woman-identified-woman—as a condition of national, racial, *and* sexual filiation. Her desire for acceptance from the black-woman-in-the-audience perpetuates the historic burden black women in cinema have borne to represent embodiment, desire, and the dignity of suffering on behalf of white

39. We have been orally instructed on the genealogy of camp counterpolitics and its intersection with radical sexuality by Richard Herrell and Pam Robertson. For textual support, see Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Ross, *No Respect*; and Pamela Robertson, "Guilty Pleasures: Camp and the Female Spectator" (unpublished manuscript, University of Chicago, 1990).

women, who are too frightened to strip themselves of the privileges of white heterospectacle. Thus, in addition, the rejection Bernhard receives from the black-woman-in-the-audience demonstrates the inability of cinematic public spectacle to make good on its teasing promise to dignify feminine desire in any of its forms. Bernhard's inability to bridge the negativity of anyone's desire focuses the lens on female spectacle itself, staging it as a scene of negativity, complete with producer, consumer, audience resistance, and the representation of multiple and ambiguous identifications.

The failed attempt to represent and to achieve a lesbian/national spectacle foregrounds the oxymoronic quality of these two models of identification. In the remainder of this essay, we mean to explain how this failure to conflate sexual and political spectacle can provide material to transfigure Queer as well as American Nationality—not to commandeer the national franchise for our particular huddled masses but instead to unsettle the conventions that name identity, frame expressivity, and provide the taxonomic means by which populations and practices are defined, regulated, protected, and censored by national law and custom. Lesbian national spectacle emerges here as the measure of a transitory space, a challenge to revise radically the boundaries of the normative public sphere and its historical modes of intelligibility, among which are male homosociality, a very narrowly defined set of public "political" interests, and garbled relations between politics and affect.⁴⁰ We understand that to define sexual expressivity as public political speech, and to resist censorship by expanding the range of erotic description, is simultaneously to exercise a fundamental privilege of American citizenship and to risk forsaking the refuge of camp. These are risks that queers/Americans cannot afford to pass on. Indeed, the question of whether female/lesbian sexuality can come into any productive contact with the political public sphere is a founding problem of lesbian political writing of the last fifteen years, and this problem is a problem for us all, by which we refer to "us" Queers and "us" Americans.

Female subjects are always citizens in masquerade: The more sexual they appear, the less abstractable they are in a liberal corporeal schema. Lesbian theory's solution to this dilemma has been to construct *imaginable* communities, which is to say that America's strategies for self-promotion have not worked for lesbians, who have historically and aesthetically often

40. For an aligned project, see Scott Tucker, "Gender, Fucking, and Utopia," *Social Text* 27 (1991): 3–34.

embraced the “space-off” in expatriate expression of their alienation from America.⁴¹ The female body has reemerged in the safe spaces of lesbian political theory outside of the political public sphere, in tribal structures that emphasize embodied ritual and intimate spectacle as a solution to the indignities women, and especially lesbians, have had to endure. The blinking question mark beside the word *nation* in Jill Johnston’s separatist *Lesbian Nation*; the erotogenic metamorphoses of the body, sex, and knowledge on the island of Monique Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body*; and even the personal gender performances central to Judith Butler’s sexual self-fashioning in *Gender Trouble* all reveal an evacuation of liberal nationality as we know it.⁴² But for what public?

Separatist withdrawal into safe territories free from the male gaze secures the possibility of nonpornotropic embodiment in everyday life and aesthetic performance by emphasizing intimacy, subjectivity, and the literally local frame.⁴³ We do not mean to diminish the benefits of separatist expatriation: In its great historical variety, separatist withdrawal has expressed a condition of political contestation lesbians and gays already experience in America and has used the erotics of community to create the foundation of a different franchise. However, by changing the locus of spectacle—transporting it over state lines, as it were—lesbian theory has neglected to engage the political problem of feminine spectacle in mass society. Even Butler’s metropolitan polymorphous solution to the politics of spectacle limits the power of transgression to what symbolic substitution on the individual body can do to transform custom and law. And as *Queer Nation* has shown us, no insistence on “the local” can secure national intimacy and national justice, where spectacle is intimacy’s vehicle, and the vehicle for control. If the spectacle of the body’s rendezvous with the flag has seemed to yoke unlike things together, the distance between persons and collective identities must also be read not only as a place to be filled up by fantasy but as a

41. See Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), and Bertha Harris, “The More Profound Nationality of Their Lesbianism: Lesbian Society in the 1920’s,” in *Amazon Expedition: A Lesbian Feminist Anthology*, ed. Phillis Birky et al. (New York: Times Change, 1973), 77–88.

42. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973); Monique Wittig, *The Lesbian Body*, trans. David Le Vay (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

43. Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby/Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17 (Summer 1987): 65–81.

negative space, a space where suddenly the various logics of identity that circulate through American culture enter into relations of contradiction and not simple analogy.

Along this axis, the negativity of national life for nonwhite and/or nonmale queers has reemerged in a more radical diacritic, the queer fanzine.⁴⁴ We move away from the word *lesbian* and toward these descriptions of negative identity because it is this space—the space of nonidentification with the national fantasy of the white male citizen—that is both the symptom of even “queered” Enlightenment nationality and also the material for its refunctioning. As a rule, underground fanzines make explicit their refusal of a property relation to information and art, repudiating the class politics of mainstream gay for-profit journals, like *The Advocate* and *Outweek*, and shunning the mock Madison Avenue production values of *Queer Nation*, *Gran Fury*, and *ACT UP*.⁴⁵ *BIMBOX* writes that the magazine is free because “the truth is, you have already paid for *BIMBOX*. We have all paid for it—dearly. We have paid for it in blood and we have paid for it in tears. Unrelenting pain is our credit limit, and we are cursed with interminable overdraft protection.”⁴⁶ Xerox collage, desktop publishing, and other phototechniques have combined in a medium of comic and political communication, whose geographically isolated examples have converged into the infocultural version of the tribe, a network.⁴⁷ Thus, the contest over the territory of the Queer Symbolic has resulted in what *Bitch Nation*, a manifesto in the Toronto fanzine *BIMBOX*, calls a civil war.

The fanzines’ only shared identity is in their *counterproductivity*—a multifold mission they share with other sexual radicalisms to counter American and Queer National cultures’ ways of thinking about political tactics

44. Citational proprieties in the “University of Chicago Style” are both inappropriate and virtually impossible with regard to the zines. Here is a selected list of those we consulted to make these generic observations: *BIMBOX* 2 (Summer 1990); *Don’t Tell Jane and Frankie* (undated); *Dumb Bitch Deserves to Die* 2 (Winter 1989); *The Gentlemen of California* 6 (undated); *Holy Titclamps* 6 (Fall 1990); *Homoture* 2 (undated); *Manhattan Review of Unnatural Acts* (undated); *Negativa* 1–3 (March–May 1991); *No World Order* (1990); *Screambox* 1 and 2 (November 1990, May 1991); *Sister/My Comrade* (Winter 1991); *Taste of Latex* 4 (Winter 1990–1991); *Thing* 4 (Spring 1991).

45. See Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS DEMO GRAPHICS*.

46. *BIMBOX* 2 (Summer 1990).

47. In May 1991, the Randolph Street Gallery of Chicago hosted the first international queer fanzine conference called “SPEW: The Homographic Convergence.”

and sexual intelligibility.⁴⁸ In the first place, the zines show that “obscenity” itself is political speech, speech that deserves constitutional protection: Transforming “the American flag into something pleasant,” Sondra Golvin and Robin Podolsky’s “Allegiance/Ecstasy” turns “i pledge allegiance” into an opportunity to add “my cunt helplessly going molten,” “her clit swelling to meet my tongue,” “my fist knocking gently at her cunt” to the national loyalty oath.⁴⁹ Additionally, the zines have widened the semantic field of sexual description, moving sexual identity itself beyond known practical and fantastic horizons—as when BIMBOX imagines “fags, dykes, and USO’s (Unidentified Sexual Objects).” But they are also magazines in the military sense, storehouses for the explosives that will shatter the categories and the time-honored political strategies through which queers have protected themselves. Queer counterspectacle might well be read as a means for aggressively achieving dignity in the straight world; in the zine context, however, these spectacles are also icons that require smashing. The suspicion of existing tactics and taxonomies runs deep: “Dykes against granola lesbians. Fags against sensitive gay men. And bitches against everyone else.”⁵⁰

Along with joining queer culture’s ongoing politics of dirty words, then, some zines engage in what would seem to be a more perverse activity: the aggressive naming and negation of their own audience. If citizenship in the Queer Nation is voluntary and consensual, democratic and universalist in the way of many modern nationalisms, the application for citizenship in the Bitch Nation, for example, repudiates the promise of community in common readership, the privileges of a common language, and the safety of counteridentity. “And—don’t even bother trying to assimilate any aspect of Bitch Nation in a futile attempt to make your paltry careers or lame causes appear more glamorous or exciting. We won’t hesitate to prosecute—and the Bitch Nation court is now in session!!!”⁵¹ As Bitch Nation endangers the reader who merely quotes, abstracts, and appropriates zine culture, many zines engage in a consumer politics of sexual enunciation, forcing

48. Rubin, “Thinking Sex”; and Lisa Duggan, “Sex Panics,” in *Democracy: A Project by Group Material*, ed. Brian Wallis (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), 209–12.

49. Sondra Golvin and Robin Podolsky, “Allegiance/Ecstasy,” *Screambox* 1 (November 1990): 20–21.

50. *Don’t Tell Jane and Frankie*, no page number.

51. We understand the risk we take in citing *Bitch Nation* against its stated will. We look forward to our punishment at the hands of editrix G. B. Jones, who “takes her girls like Tylenol–2 at a time” (see *Don’t Tell Jane and Frankie*).

the reader to see where she is situated, or to resituate herself politically and culturally: Thus, when the cover of *Thing* magazine proclaims that "She Knows Who She Is," it mobilizes the common gay use of the feminine pronoun in the ventriloquized voice of the woman's magazine to categorize "insiders" by attitude rather than by gender or sexual identity, disarming many different kinds of essentialism through arch indirect address.

This move to materialize the spectator as *different* from the spectacle with which she identifies has powerful political force for women, whose collective and individual self-representations are always available for embarrassment, and most particularly for lesbians, whose sexual iconography has been overdetermined by the straight porn industry. By reversing the direction of the embarrassment from the spectacle toward the spectator, the zines rotate the meaning of *consent*. In severing sexual identity from sexual expressivity, the spectacle talks dirty to *you*, as it were, and you no longer have the privilege to consume in silence, or in tacit unconsciousness of or unaccountability for your own fantasies. As *Negativa*, a Chicago lesbian fanzine, puts it, "What you looking at, bitch?" (see figure 1).

Linked complexly to the enigma of consensual sex is that of consensual nationality, which similarly involves theories of self-identity, of intention, and of the urge to shed the personal body for the tease of safe mutual or collective unboundedness. American and Queer National spectacle depend upon the citizen's capacity to merge his/her private, fractured body with a collectively identified whole one. Uncle Sam points his finger and says he wants *you* to donate your whole body literally and figuratively to the nation, and Queer Nation uses the allure of commercial and collective embodied spectacle to beckon *you* toward a different sort of citizenship. But the fanzines' postnational spectacle disrupts this moment of convergence: Just as *you*, the desiring citizen, enter the sphere of what appears to be mutual consent, an invisible finger points back at you. It unveils your desire to see the spectacle of homoculture without being seen; it embarrasses you by making explicit your desire to "enter" and your need for "permission" to identify; and it insists that you declare your body and your goods and that you pay whatever political and erotic duty seems necessary.

Thus, like Queer Nation, the zines channel submission and bitterness into anger and parody. Queer Nation and allied groups struggle to reoccupy the space of national legitimation, to make the national world safe for just systems of resource distribution and communication, to make it safe for full expression of difference and rage and sexuality. Parody and camp thus become the measure of proximity to the national promise, as well as



Figure 1. From *Negativa*, by AK Summers

the distance from access to its fulfillment. Gestures of anger, parody, and camp in the zine network, by contrast, represent a disinvestment in authenticity discourse that moves beyond the intelligibility of gender, of sexual object choice, and of national identity by cultivating a passionate investment in developing the negative for pleasure and politics. In their drive to embody *you*, the citizen/spectator/reader/lover, by negating your disembodiment, the zines represent the horizon of postpatriarchal and postnational fantasy.

Even in their most parodic manifestations, gestures of sexual and national intelligibility—both oppressive and emancipatory—are part of a process of making norms. The zines acknowledge the necessity, and also the reality, of stereotypical self-identity and at the same time try to do violence to normative forms that circulate in America. In staging the process by which stereotypes become hybrid forms, their clarifying function as sites of identity and oppression exhausted, the zines do more than deconstructively put the icon “under erasure.”⁵² The negated stereotype remains available: Mass politics requires a genuinely populist currency. But the stereotype is expensive. The fanzines’ gestures in countering national political sovereignty, then, lead us in another direction. They suggest a space of politics in which to be “out” in public would not be to consent parodically to the forms of the political public sphere but to be *out beyond* the censoring imaginary of the state and the information culture that consolidates the rule of its names. We support Queer Nation and ACT UP’s commitment to occupy as many hegemonic spaces as possible in their countering moves. What we seek to describe, in addition, is the value in converting the space of negativity that distinguishes Queer American identity into a discursive field so powerful that the United States will have to develop a new breed of lexical specialists to crack the code of collective life in a hot war of words about sex and America, about which the nation already finds itself so miserably—and yet so spectacularly—archaic.

52. On the national stereotype and hybrid identities, see Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,” in *Out There*, 71–87.